

Macdonald
Irony in history

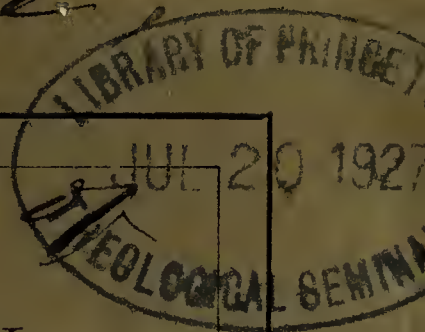
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Rev. Dr. Hodge



with regards

IRONY IN HISTORY:

The Author

OR

WAS GIBBON AN INFIDEL?

BY

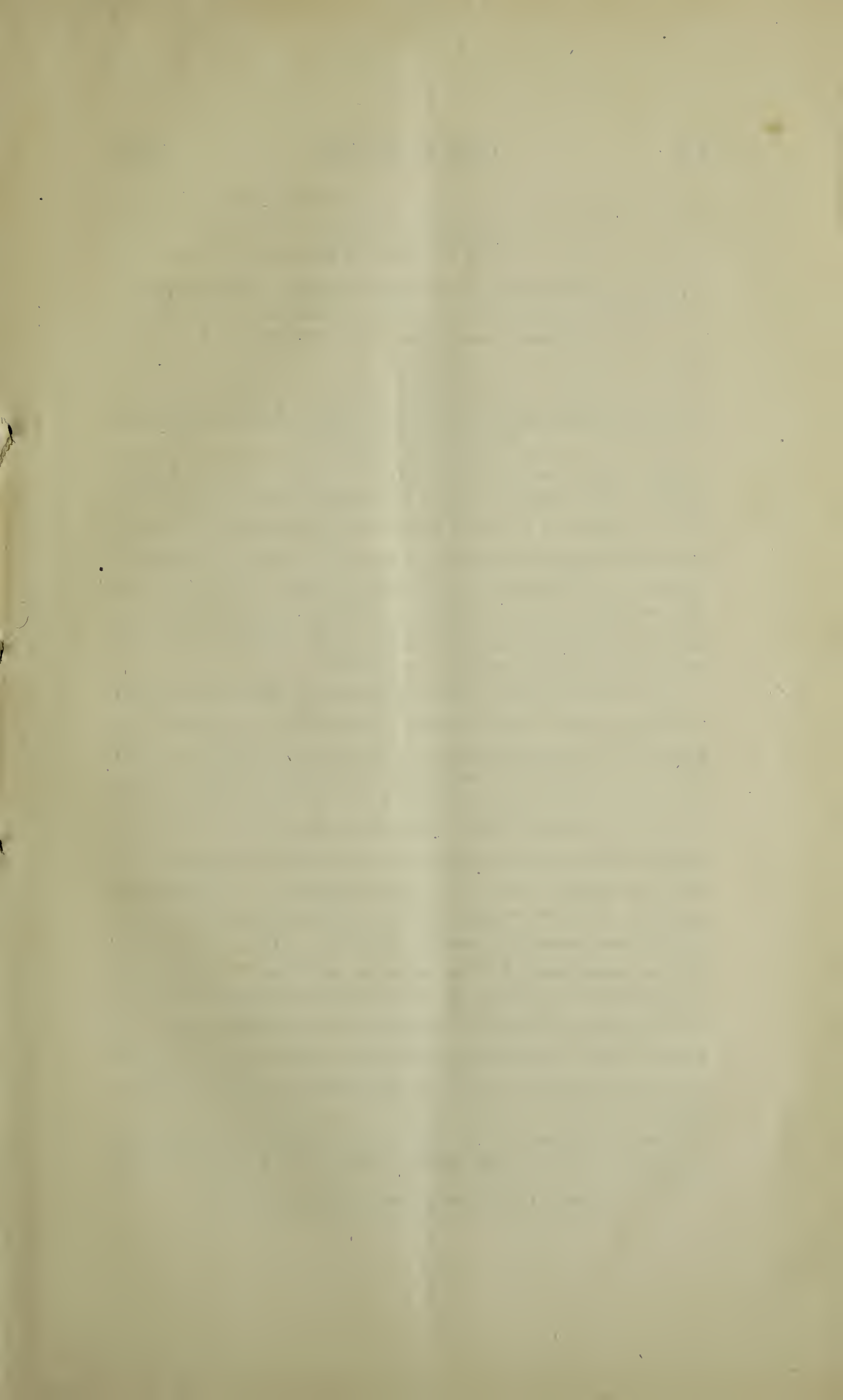
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ARTICLE IV.

IRONY IN HISTORY; OR, WAS GIBBON AN INFIDEL?

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PART I.

1. *The Charge against Gibbon, as stated by Dean Milman and Bishop Watson.*

THE author of the "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" has been accused of resorting to irony and sarcasm in those parts of his work where he seems to speak approvingly of Christianity, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters. The charge, as reduced to distinct terms by those who profess to have made this history their study for the purpose of furnishing a corrective to its statements (or the manner of its statements), is as follows:

"The art of Gibbon," says Milman (in his edition of the "Decline and Fall," designed, professedly, to correct by notes such inaccuracies or misstatements as may have been detected, particularly with regard to Christianity), "or, at least, the unfair impression produced by his two memorable chapters, consists in his confounding together in one indistinguishable mass, the origin and apostolic propagation of the new religion with its later progress. The main question, the divine origin of the religion, was dexterously eluded or speciously conceded by Gibbon. His plan enabled him to commence his account, in most parts, below the apostolic times; and it was only by the strength of the dark coloring with which he brought out the failings and the follies of the succeeding ages that a shadow of doubt and suspicion was thrown back on the primitive period of Christianity."¹

Among the various answers made to Gibbon on the first appearance of his work, Bishop Watson's "Apology" is the

¹ Milman's Gibbon (Boston, 1853), Preface, pp. 15, 16.

only one Milman considers as possessed of sufficient merit to render it worthy of notice. In his preface, above quoted, he describes it as "able," but as being "rather a general argument than an examination of misstatements." "In assigning," says Bishop Watson, "to this astonishing event [the early success of Christianity] five secondary causes, derived from the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind, you seem to some to have insinuated that Christianity, like other impostures, might have made its way in the world, though its origin had been as human as the means by which you suppose it was spread. It is no wish or intention of mine to fasten the odium of this insinuation upon you."¹

Statements of the objections to this history might be given from a great variety of sources, but none from better-informed or more careful writers. The gravamen of the whole appears to be that Gibbon explained the rapid extension of Christianity by secondary causes, and that his express admission of the divine origin of this religion must be taken in an insidious and ironical sense; his true meaning being that it is unnecessary, in view of such causes, to admit that this religion had any such origin.

2. *Irony, its Nature and Use.*

Irony consists in seeming to adopt false conclusions or sophistical reasonings for the purpose of making their absurdity appear. It is a use of language conveying a meaning contrary to its literal import. It is a *reductio ad ridiculum*. When properly used it is an effective weapon, and there is no kind of writing to which it is not adapted. We find it even in the Bible; as when Elijah taunted the prophets of Baal, and said: "Cry aloud; for he is a god. Either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked" (1 Kings xviii. 27). It occurs frequently in the appeals of orators and public speakers; as, for example, in the Philippics of Demosthenes

¹ First Letter to Gibbon.

and the orations of Cicero ; in the speeches of Chatham and Burke, Henry and Webster ; in the sermons of Saurin and South. Sometimes it has been extensively used in arguments on the gravest questions. It characterizes in an eminent degree the Provincial Letters of Pascal. The late Archbishop Whately published a pamphlet under the title of " Historic Doubts relative to the Existence of Napoleon Bonaparte," wholly ironical ; the object of which was to show that objections similar to those brought against the scripture history, and much more plausible, might be urged against all the received accounts of this distinguished personage of modern history. Edmund Burke had in like manner before him, in his " Defence of Natural Society, by a late Noble Lord," assuming the person of Bolingbroke, proved, according to the principles of that author, that the arguments he brought against ecclesiastical, would equally lie against civil, institutions.

3. *Illegitimate Use of Irony.*

Care, of course, must be taken to make such use of language, or to employ, in oral discourse, such emphasis in pronunciation, that the real meaning may not be mistaken. No argument is required to show that a writer is guilty of a gross literary blunder who so uses irony that he is fairly understood as sincerely defending the false proposition he assumes, or who so much as leaves it doubtful whether he is employing it or not. If, for example, Elijah might have been fairly understood as expressing his belief that Baal was truly God when he said he was a god ; if Pascal in his raillery of the fathers of the Sorbonne had been understood as pronouncing their logomachies solid arguments ; if Demosthenes had been understood as affirming that the ambassadors and representatives of Philip were superior to the king himself ; Burke as proclaiming himself a disciple of Bolingbroke, and Whately as denying the existence of such a man as Bonaparte, or attempting to inculcate universal scepticism ; or if the language used in any of these

cases had left it doubtful what was intended, then is it clear that the writer, however great his name in literature, has made an illegitimate and unskilful use of this mode of writing. Its ironical character must be evident, or the purpose of its introduction is defeated, and worse than defeated.

Especially is this true in history. History professes to deal with facts. We properly regard the narrator of it as in some sense a witness on the stand. He must speak truly. He has no right to trifle, or to speak under such tropes as to hide his real meaning. If he purposely hides his real meaning, so far as facts are concerned, it of course becomes a false statement; and to the extent this vice of style characterizes a work, it is rendered valueless as a history. Irony may be as legitimately employed in historical as in any other writings; but under the same necessary law it must be evident that it is employed. If whole pages and chapters, and an entire class of facts and characters in a history covering several centuries are presented ironically, and the irony is left doubtful, so that we can neither decide where it begins nor where it ends, it seems to be a just ground of condemnation of the whole work. If Gibbon wrote in this style, Paley might well ask with reference to the difficulty of answering him, "Who can refute a sneer?" and Byron describe him as

" Snapping a solemn creed with solemn sneer,
The lord of irony, that master-spell."

4. *The Historian to speak for himself.*

The most satisfactory course to be pursued in eliciting the truth on this subject, is first to take up the work itself, to ascertain from it, so far as this is possible, the author's real sentiments regarding Christianity, as if we knew nothing of his personal history. To permit what he has himself put on record, in the matter whereof he is called in question, to testify for or against him, according to a just interpretation, seems, indeed, to be the only fair mode of proceeding. After this is done, we may then inquire whether there is any evi-

dence from other writings or sources, that he stood in a hostile attitude towards Christianity.

Not only the true position, on the most important of all questions, of a man who must be allowed to have been one of the greatest ornaments of historical literature is concerned; but in respect to this important question itself, the divinity of the Christian religion, the truth of history, as far as the authority and testimony of his work extend, is directly involved.

5. *Mr. Gibbon on the Success of Christianity.*

The fifteenth chapter opens with this striking paragraph: "A candid and rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity may be considered as a very essential part of the history of the Roman empire. While that great body was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the capitol. Nor was the influence of Christianity confined to the period or to the limits of the Roman empire. After a revolution of thirteen or fourteen centuries, that religion is still professed by the nations of Europe, the most distinguished portion of human kind in arts and learning as well as in arms. By the industry and zeal of the Europeans it has been widely diffused to the most distant shores of Asia and Africa; and by the means of their colonies has been firmly established from Canada to Chili, in a world unknown to the ancients."

Mr. Milman professes to see a change in the tone and a falling off in the style of Mr. Gibbon, where he comes to trace the progress of Christianity. It surely is not to be detected in these opening sentences. They form a very remarkable introduction to an assault upon Christianity. The historian even seems to go out of his way to speak of the thirteen or fourteen centuries of revolution which this "pure and humble religion" had survived, of its spread to

the most distant shores of Asia and Africa, and its establishment on this continent in a world unknown to the ancients. If this be sarcasm (Milman charges him with "malignant sarcasm") the mode of being sarcastic in Gibbon's day was certainly very peculiar.

6. *The Difficulties Gibbon felt in his Undertaking.*

He proceeds in the introduction to the fifteenth chapter : "But this inquiry, however useful or entertaining, is attended with two peculiar difficulties. The scanty and suspicious materials of ecclesiastical history seldom enable us to dispel the dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the church. The great law of impartiality, too, often obliges us to reveal the imperfections of the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel ; and, to a careless observer, their faults may seem to cast a shade on the faith which they professed."

The mention of these two difficulties, the suspicious materials of ecclesiastical history, and the necessity of referring to the faults of nominal Christians, prove that he was fully aware of the perilous ground over which his proposed task must take him. But it would be only to the "careless observer" that a shade would seem to be cast over the Christian faith. He immediately adds in language which sounds very strange as coming from a rejecter of the gospel :

"But the scandal of the pious Christian and the fallacious triumph of the infidel should cease as soon as they recollect not only by whom, but likewise to whom, the divine revelation was given. The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing religion as she descended from heaven arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence upon earth among a weak and degenerate race of beings."

Mr. Gibbon, in these extracts, either speaks in the most reverential terms of the Christian religion, and avows his faith in it, or he is speaking sneeringly, sarcastically, ironi-

cally. Is there satire or irony in what he says of the removal of the scandal of the Christian, and the fallacious triumph of the infidel, in view of the imperfections of the uninspired teachers and believers of Christianity, by the recollection of its divine origin? Or, in the important distinction he draws between the task of the theologian and that of the historian; the former having to set forth the doctrines of a religion revealed from heaven to inspired, the latter to describe the actions and errors of uninspired, men? On the contrary, never was the humbling doctrine of human degeneracy and infirmity more powerfully or eloquently stated. A divine religion must be judged irrespective of the weakness of its recipients and exponents.

Dean Milman has the candor to acknowledge that the melancholy and humiliating view of the early progress of Christianity cannot be charged wholly on the historian. "It is idle," he says, "it is disingenuous, to deny or to dissemble the early depravations of Christianity, its gradual, but rapid departure from its primitive simplicity and purity, still more from its spirit of universal love."¹ He admits that the passage just quoted, separated from the following disquisition, "might commence a Christian history, written in the Christian spirit of candor."² In his "History of Latin Christianity" Milman himself notices how the lofty claims of Christianity, that it came down from heaven, "might appear utterly belied by the claims of conflicting doctrines on the belief, all declared to be essential to salvation, and the animosities and bloody quarrels which desolated Christian cities. Anathema instead of benediction had almost become the general language of the church. Religious wars, at least rare in the pagan state of society, seemed now a new and perpetual source of misery, a cause and a sign of the weakness and decay, and so of the inevitable dissolution of the Roman empire."³ Did Milman, then, regret the sub-

¹ Preface to Gibbon, p. 19.

² Milman's Gibbon, Note, p. 505.

³ Milman's Latin Christianity (New York), Vol i. p. 353.

stitution of a Christian for the pagan state of society? Or did he intend that the dark coloring in the picture he draws should "throw back" a shadow of doubt and suspicion on the primitive period of Christianity?

7. *Gibbon's Plan in this Portion of his History, and his Reason for Confining himself to Secondary Causes.*

Mr. Gibbon next proceeds to announce a very distinct and formal plan, according to which he proposes to discuss the great subject of the progress and establishment of Christianity. And he introduces it with another most striking and distinct concession of its truth and divine origin:

"Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned — that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author."

Without any qualification or the least appearance of prevarication, he admits that this answer is both obvious and completely satisfactory; but to make it in the particular work in which he was engaged his special or only answer would be to invade the domain of the theologian. Milman accuses him of confounding the origin and apostolic propagation of the new religion with its later progress. Is this just, when he marks, as he does here, so clearly, the distinction between them, and has so good reason, as Milman himself intimates, for confining himself to the human causes that operated in its later progress, to wit, that his account had its commencement "below apostolic times"? Gibbon would not forget that his work was that of the historian. Hence he proceeds:

"But as truth and reason seldom find so favorable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind as instruments to execute its purpose, we may still be permitted,

though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first [again carefully guarding against the impression that he ignored the great First Cause], but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church."

The chief ground of the suspicion which had been awakened against Gibbon, as stated by Bishop Watson, was, that he explained the rapid spread of Christianity by these merely secondary causes, as if he intended to insinuate that Christianity, like other impostures, might have made its way in the world though its origin had been as human as the means. But Gibbon claimed, and it is difficult to see why not justly, that to confine his attention to these "secondary causes" was his peculiar province as a historian. That there were such causes, and that such are still in operation, under the direction of Divine Providence, for the promotion of religion, cannot be denied. They are recognized and often specified by the firmest advocates of our holy religion. There is not a history nor a treatise bearing on this subject in which they are not made more or less prominent. Even Milman himself, as a historian, recognizes them, and uses language open to similar or more serious objection than that used by Gibbon. In his "History of Christianity to the Abolition of Paganism in the Roman Empire," he thus speaks of the effect of a mistaken opinion or belief to which Gibbon also incidentally refers in connection with one of his five causes: "There can be no doubt both that many of the early Christians almost hourly expected the final dissolution of the world, and that this opinion awed many timid believers into the profession of Christianity, and kept them in trembling subjection to its authority. The ambiguous predictions of Christ himself, in which the destruction of the Jewish polity and the ruin of the city and Temple were shadowed forth under images of more remote and universal import; the language of the apostles, so liable to misinterpretation that they were obliged publicly to correct the erroneous conclusions of their hearers, seemed to countenance an

opinion so disparaging to the real glory of Christianity, which was only to attain its object after a slow contest of many centuries, perhaps of ages, with the evil of human nature.”¹ In setting forth the “design” of his history, he expressly says that “it is his opinion that at every period much more is to be attributed [in accounting for “each phasis of Christianity”] to the circumstances of the age, to the collective operation of certain principles which grew out of the events of the time, than to the intentional or accidental influence of any individual or class of men. It [Christianity] will darken with the darkness and brighten with the light of each succeeding century. In an ungenial time it will recede so far from its genuine and essential nature as scarcely to retain any sign of its divine original.”

These passages are the more important, as Milman appears to have prepared his historical works with the design of counteracting that portion of Gibbon’s which relates to Christianity, or as the best mode of answering him. This is inferred from the language he uses in an Article on Guizot’s edition of Gibbon in the *London Quarterly Review* for January 1834. That the Article is from his pen is evident, as the preface or introduction to Milman’s edition is to a considerable extent in the same words as those found in this Article. He says: “Nothing less is wanting [i.e. to weaken or neutralize the general impression of Gibbon’s work] than a Christian account of the whole period, written in an attractive style and in a vein of true philosophy, fairly tracing and constantly estimating the real effects of the Christian religion on the mind, the manners, and destinies of mankind. It must be a history attempted on a totally different plan from any yet published in this country, or, indeed, with complete success elsewhere. It must be very unlike the dry polemic manner of Mosheim, and the more animated, but uncritical and sectarian work of Milner. It must obtain its triumph, not by writing down those parts of history on which Gibbon has lavished all the power and

¹ Milman’s *History of Christianity* (London, 1840), Vol. i. p. 455.

splendor of his style, but by writing up Christianity to its proper place in the annals of human civilization. For here is the radical defect in the 'Decline and Fall.'"¹ It is therefore justly inferred that Milman, both in his "History of Christianity to the Extinction of Paganism," and his "History of Latin Christianity," although Gibbon's name scarcely appears in either, sought to realize in these works what he regarded as the only successful mode of answering Gibbon. But there will be occasion to compare still further the opinions or the manner in which these two historians state important points.

To return: It is true that Mr. Gibbon confines himself as a historian exclusively to secondary causes. But, if he admits that the rapid spread of Christian doctrine was owing to the convincing evidence that was in that doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its divine Author, and at the same time assigns a good reason for confining himself to these causes—to wit, that they alone belonged to his sphere as a historian,—ought he not to have the benefit of his own avowals, until it is clearly proved that they were not intended to be taken in their literal sense? It is to be observed that he nowhere intimates that these secondary causes are sufficient (but the contrary) to account for the progress of Christianity; and at the same time he unmistakably asserts that these causes were used or overruled by Divine Providence to execute the purpose of promoting the reception of this pure and humble religion.

8. *The Secondary Causes Enumerated by Him.*

These are as follows: "1. The inflexible and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians; derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses. 2. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy

¹ London Quarterly, No 100, Art. i. Vol. 1. p. 295.

to that important doctrine. 3. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. 4. The pure and austere morals of the Christians. 5. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire." The examination of these *seriatim* constitutes the subject-matter of the fifteenth chapter.

The author, it will be observed, does not profess to enumerate all the secondary causes, but contents himself with naming those which he thought, it would appear, had been most influential. Not one of them, as stated by him, has the least disparaging aspect towards the Christian cause; but all are in strict harmony with its lofty and sacred nature. It is mentioned in the Life of Sir James Macintosh, that he was persuaded "to look through the famous fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Gibbon." "I could not lay them down," he says, "without finishing them. The causes assigned in the fifteenth chapter, for the diffusion of Christianity, must, no doubt, have contributed to it materially; but I doubt whether he saw them all. Perhaps those which he enumerates are among the most obvious. They might all be safely adopted by a Christian writer, with some change in the language and manner."¹

9. *Secondary Causes of the Triumph of Christianity as stated by Merivale.*

The Rev. Charles Merivale, B.D., author of "A History of the Romans under the Empire"; Rector of Lawford, and Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons, will not be suspected of hostility to Christianity by any one, who has read his History, or the Boyle Lectures for 1864. He is, as his titles indicate, an honored minister of the church of England; and yet, in the "Conversion of the Roman empire" to Christianity he recognizes the operation of secondary or human causes. And several of those he names are identical with the ones assigned by Gibbon.

¹ Milman's Gibbon, p. 244, note.

The subject of his Boyle Lectures was, The Conversion of the Roman Empire. In the Lectures, he confines himself mainly to one branch of the Christian evidences, by which, as he believes, the most refined and intelligent of the heathen were actually converted; namely, to "the sense of spiritual destitution, the consciousness of sin, the acknowledged need of a Sanctifier and a Redeemer." "And with this may be combined," he adds, "the results which flowed from the recognized want of a system of positive belief." But in the Introduction to these Lectures as published, he names other causes as operating in this great transformation, which he had no time to notice within the limits of eight lectures, delivered from a pulpit to a mixed and fluctuating congregation. He says that he refrained from dwelling on that branch of the subject known as the external evidence to the truth of Christianity, not only because it was ill-suited to the pulpit, but because "the age was uncritical, and little competent to weigh such external testimony with the accuracy which is now demanded. There was great proneness to accept the claim of miracles; but at the same time, and in consequence of this very proneness, very little weight was attached to it as an argument of divine power. Great stress was laid on the fulfilment of prophecy, but in this respect also the age was liable to be grossly imposed upon; and it must be allowed that the preaching of Christianity owes some portion, however trifling, of its success to the false pretension of the so-called Sibylline Oracles, which form no part of its genuine credentials." Nothing can be found in Gibbon wearing a more suspicious aspect than this. And yet, no one can call in question the Christianity of the writer, or prove the falsity of what he says.

The third of the four causes which he assigns, is identical with Gibbon's fourth; to wit, the pure lives, or "the practical effect of Christian teaching upon those who embraced it." He thinks this was "a testimony which worked powerfully upon large numbers among the heathen, among persons perhaps of less critical acumen, but eminently susceptible of impressions from the contemplation of goodness."

The fourth and last of the secondary causes named by Merivale is of a similar nature to the fifth and last mentioned by Gibbon. "No argument," he says, "was so effectual, no testimony to the divine authority of the gospel so convincing, as that from the temporal success with which Christianity was eventually crowned." "The conversion," he continues, "of the more intelligent among the heathen, which encouraged the *coup d'état* of the first Christian emperor, had been, I conceive, actually effected before the proved inefficacy of the heathen religions had caused them to be abandoned by the herd of time-servers. The empire as a political machine was now transferred to the rule of Christ," etc. "To the Romans, as long as they retained a spark of ancient sentiment, the emperor, in his capacity as chief pontiff, a title with which Constantine and Valentinian dared not dispense, seemed still the appointed minister of the national religion, still the intercessor for divine favor, the channel of covenanted mercies to the state, whatever form of ministration he might employ, to whatever name he might address himself in behalf of the empire."¹

Similar statements and views in Gibbon are precisely those which fall under the censure of Bishop Watson's criticism.

10. *The Manner in which Mr. Gibbon unfolds the Operation of his several Causes.*

The first of these is the inflexible and intolerant zeal of the Christians towards false religions, purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit which had distinguished the Jews. He uses the word "intolerant" here, as is evident from what follows, in no odious sense, but as opposed to that "facility with which the most different and even hostile nations embraced, or at least respected, each other's superstitions." There was nothing of this facility in Christianity; being a revelation from heaven, and pronouncing every other religion false, and idolatry to be an insult to Jehovah, it could not recognize in any other religion any claim whatever.

¹ Merivale's Conversion of the Roman Empire, see Preface.

After noticing those features of Judaism which fitted it for a particular country, as well as for a single nation, Mr. Gibbon proceeds :

“ Under these circumstances, Christianity offered itself to the world, armed with the strength of the Mosaic law, and delivered from the weight of its fetters. An exclusive zeal [equivalent to his former expression, intolerant zeal] for the truth of religion and the unity of God was as carefully inculcated in the new as in the ancient system ; and whatever was now revealed to mankind concerning the nature and designs of the Supreme Being was fitted to increase their reverence for that mysterious doctrine. The divine authority of Moses and the prophets was admitted, and even established as the firmest basis of Christianity. From the beginning of the world an uninterrupted series of predictions had announced and prepared the long-expected coming of the Messiah, who, in compliance with the gross apprehensions of the Jews, had been more frequently represented under the character of a king and conqueror, than under that of a prophet, a martyr, and the Son of God. By his expiatory sacrifice the imperfect sacrifices of the temple were at once consummated and abolished. The ceremonial law, which consisted only of types and figures, was succeeded by a pure and spiritual worship, equally adapted to all climes as well as to every condition of mankind ; and to the initiation of blood was substituted a more harmless initiation of water. The promise of divine favor, instead of being partially confined to the posterity of Abraham, was universally proposed to the freeman and the slave, to the Greek and to the barbarian, to the Jew and to the Gentile. Every privilege that could raise the proselyte from earth to heaven, that could exalt his devotions, secure his happiness, or even gratify that secret pride which under the semblance of devotion, insinuates itself into the human heart, was still reserved for the members of the Christian church ; but at the same time all mankind was permitted, and even solicited, to accept the glorious distinction, which was not only proffered as a favor,

but imposed as an obligation. It became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relations the inestimable blessing which he had received, and to warn them against a refusal that would be severely punished as a criminal disobedience to the will of a benevolent but all-powerful Deity."

Is any misrepresentation or inuendo discoverable in this? Does Gibbon's pen here betray its bias against our faith? Could any acknowledged Christian writer present a fairer or more eloquent summary of it, or state more clearly and accurately the relation between the two testaments or economies; or speak more reverentially or conceive more correctly of the true central position of the "expiatory sacrifice" on which Christians rest their everlasting hopes?

Could we place the picture of Paganism which he proceeds to sketch side by side with this, we might perhaps be able more fairly to judge whether his sympathies were with it rather than with the religion of the Bible. He describes it as a system of human fraud and error:

"The Christian, who, with pious horror, avoided the abomination of the circus or the theatre, found himself encompassed with infernal snares," and on the most "interesting occasions [such as bridals and funerals] was compelled to desert the persons who were the dearest to him rather than contract the guilt inherent to those impious ceremonies." "The arts of music and painting, of eloquence and poetry, flowed from the same impure origin."

Gibbon represents the primitive Christians, whatever differences might exist between them — whether Orthodox, Ebionites, or Gnostics, — as all equally animated with the same abhorrence of idolatry. Of the Ebionite and Gnostic heresies he speaks only as a man could whose sympathies were with the truth. Thus he says:

"While the orthodox church preserved a just medium between excessive veneration and improper contempt for the law of Moses, the various heretics deviated into equal but opposite extremes of error and extravagance. From the

acknowledged truth of the Jewish religion, the Ebionites had concluded that it could never be abolished. From its supposed imperfections, the Gnostics as hastily inferred that it never was instituted by the wisdom of the Deity. There are some objections against the authority of Moses and the prophets, which too readily present themselves to the sceptical mind, though they can only be derived from our ignorance of remote antiquity, and from our incapacity to form an adequate judgment of the Divine economy. These objections were eagerly embraced and as petulantly urged by the vain science of the Gnostics."

This is inexplicable language for a man to use who was biased either against the doctrines of the Bible as commonly received among Christians or the orthodox view of them.

And here it may be remarked that Mr. Gibbon in his history gives proof of the most thorough acquaintance with the patristical polemic theology. He is not excelled in this respect by any professed theologian or any historian of the church. In his discussion of the doctrine of the Logos, for example, and the influence of Platonism in the early church, the Arian and Athanasian controversy, even to the distinction made in the terms Homocousion and Homoiousion, he exhibits a most thorough knowledge of the subjects in all their bearings, theological as well as historical. Nothing is more wonderful than the attainments he had made, and that evidently by original investigations in this department of learning. His work, although Dean Milman in the entire eight volumes of his "History of Latin Christianity" makes scarcely an allusion to it, and not one of a disparaging nature, is indispensable to the student of ecclesiastical history.

In the second place, Mr. Gibbon considers the doctrine of a future life, supported and sanctioned as it is by Christianity, as among the powerful secondary causes which gave it wide and rapid extension. After referring to the uncertainty of the ancient philosophers with regard to the immortality of the soul, he says, with a discrimination and an appreciation

of the whole subject rarely equalled except by those who have followed closely in his steps :

“ Since, therefore, the most sublime efforts of philosophy can extend no further than feebly to point out the desire, the hope, or at most the probability of a future state, there is nothing except a divine revelation that can ascertain the existence and describe the condition of the invisible country which is destined to receive the souls of men after their separation from the body. It was necessary that the doctrine of life and immortality, which had been dictated by nature, approved by reason, and received by superstition, should obtain the sanction of divine truth from the authority and example of Christ. When the promise of eternal happiness was proposed to mankind on condition of adopting the faith and of observing the precepts of the gospel, it is no wonder that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers of every religion, of every rank, and of every province in the empire. The ancient Christians were animated by a contempt for their present existence and by a just confidence of immortality of which the doubtful and imperfect faith of modern ages cannot give us any adequate notion.”

He then proceeds to maintain that the erroneous opinion respecting the Millennium which prevailed in the primitive church helped the prevalence of Christianity. “ The revolution of seventeen centuries,” he says, “ has instructed us not to press too closely the mysterious language of prophecy and revelation ; but as long as for wise purposes this error was permitted to subsist in the church, it was productive of the most salutary effects.” In other words, he held that Providence could and did overrule the errors and mistakes of men for the wider diffusion of true religion.

Bishop Watson, on this part of the subject, contents himself with denying that there was anything in “ the doctrine of a future life as promulged in the gospel ” calculated to induce the heathen to receive the gospel ; and, in regard to the Millennium, his whole argument is directed to prove that

the apostles did not expect that Christ would come in their time, which is nowhere asserted by Gibbon. He was writing of what occurred subsequent to the times of the apostles, and distinctly states what is well known to have been the fact, that this expectation arose from pressing too closely, or from a too literal interpretation of the language of prophecy.

In treating the third of the causes named, "the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church," it is not to be forgotten that he means, by the primitive church, the church in the post-apostolic period. Gibbon did not believe that the gift of miracles was continued in the church after the times of the apostles. In this he followed the Rev. Conyers Middleton, D.D., author of the *Life of Cicero*, and a distinguished minister of the church of England. He maintains, nevertheless, that the false claim to miraculous powers had its effect in gaining adherents to the Christian cause. Whether he was right or wrong in this opinion, his holding and advocating it does not of itself prove that he intended thereby to cast a slur on the Christian faith.

"The duty of an historian," he says, "does not call upon him to interpose his private judgment in this nice and important controversy [in respect to the genuineness of the post-apostolic miracles, a controversy which, just previously, in connexion with the publication of Dr. Middleton's views, had waxed warm and angry]; but he ought not to dissemble the difficulty of adopting such a theory as may reconcile the interest of religion with that of reason, of making a proper application of that theory, and of defining with precision the limits of that happy period, exempt from error and from deceit, to which we ought to be disposed to extend the gift of supernatural powers. From the first of the Fathers to the last of the Popes, a succession of bishops, of saints, of martyrs, and of miracles is continued without interruption; and the progress of the superstition was so gradual and almost imperceptible, that we know not in what particular link we should break the chain of tradition. And yet, since every friend to revelation is persuaded of the reality, and every reasonable

man is convinced of the cessation of miraculous powers, it is evident that there must have been some period when they were withdrawn from the Christian church. The recent experience of genuine miracles should have instructed the Christian world in the ways of Providence, and habituated their eye (if we may use a very inadequate expression) to the style of the Divine Artist. Should the most skilful painter of modern Italy presume to decorate his feeble imitations with the name of Raphael or of Correggio, the insolent fraud would be soon discovered, and indignantly rejected." Surely a Christian writer might say, as Mr. Gibbon does, that the Most High could carry on his cause in spite of the impositions of those who laid claim to miraculous powers, and could even overrule these impositions for its advancement. Mr. Gibbon adhering to his stately historical style, in distinction from the theological, says: "The unresisting softness of temper, so conspicuous in the second and third centuries [Mr. Merivale, in a passage already quoted, says, "the age was uncritical, and little competent to weigh external testimony"] rendered the miracles of the primitive church of some accidental value to the cause of truth and religion." "The real or imaginary prodigies, of which the primitive Christians so frequently conceived themselves to be the objects, the instruments, or the spectators, very happily disposed them to adopt with the same ease, but with far greater justice, the authentic wonders of the evangelic history; and thus, miracles that exceeded not the measure of their own experience, inspired them with the most lively assurance of mysteries which were acknowledged to surpass the limits of their understanding."

In all this, and in all that he says on this topic, there is not the least sign discoverable of sympathy with his contemporary Hume, in the principle, that no amount of testimony is sufficient to prove a miracle, as being contrary to human experience. In the contrast which he runs between the true and the false, he does not merely concede, but claims, that there must have been true miracles. Bishop Watson, in what is termed his "Reply," contents himself with attempt-

ing to rebut the prejudices against all miracles, of many in his age, in which class, he says, expressly addressing himself to Mr. Gibbon, "I am far from including you."

The pure morals of the Christians, is the fourth of the human causes on which Mr. Gibbon comments as seconding the influence of revelation. He extols their virtues, but does not leave out of the picture the shades imparted by their censures and proscription of many of the innocent pleasures and amusements of life. Alluding to the "reproach suggested by the ignorance or the malice of infidelity," that many of the converts to Christianity were once atrocious criminals, he says:

"But this reproach, when it is cleared from misrepresentation, contributes as much to the honor, as it did to the increase of the church. The friends of Christianity," he continues, "may acknowledge without a blush, that many of the most eminent saints had been, before their baptism, the most abandoned sinners."

At the same time, he represents the early Fathers, in accordance with what cannot be denied, as carrying the "duties of self-mortification, of purity, and of patience, to a height which it is scarcely possible to attain, and much less to preserve, in our present state of weakness and corruption." Mr. Milman pronounces it an insidious and sarcastic description, and regards the paragraphs in which it is contained, as the most uncandid in his History.

The union and discipline of the Christian republic, or church, is the last of the series of causes on which Mr. Gibbon remarks. He says of the first organized churches in the Roman empire, that "independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution. The public functions of religion were solely intrusted to the established ministers of the church, the bishops and the presbyters; two appellations which, in their first origin, appear to have distinguished the same office and the same order of persons." He then points out the circumstances under which the "title of Bishop began to raise itself above the humble appellation of Presbyter."

Bishop Watson admits that the account he gives "of the origin and progress of episcopal jurisdiction, of the pre-eminence of the metropolitan churches," is, "in general, accurate and true"; and is not surprised at the severity with which he speaks of the most benign religion that can be conceived of, being made, through the ambition and avarice of men, the instrument of oppression.

Mr. Gibbon next proceeds to take a general and combined view of the influence of his five causes; and referring to the loss of power over the common mind of the prevailing superstitious systems, uses this language — very remarkable for an unbeliever:

"Some deities of a more recent and fashionable cast might soon have occupied the deserted temples of Jupiter and Apollo, if, in the decisive moment, the wisdom of Providence had not interposed a genuine revelation, fitted to inspire the most rational esteem and conviction, while at the same time it was adorned with all that could attract the curiosity, the wonder, and the veneration of the people." In concluding the chapter, after having spoken of the comparatively small number who enlisted themselves under the banner of the cross (not more than a twentieth of the subjects of the whole empire), before the conversion of Constantine, he says: "But how shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world to those evidences which were represented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason but to their senses? During the age of Christ, of his apostles, and of their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by innumerable prodigies. The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, demons were expelled, and the laws of nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the church. But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from the awful spectacle, and pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral and physical government of the world. Under the reign of Tiberias, the whole earth, or at least a celebrated

province of the Roman empire, was involved in a preternatural darkness of three hours. Even this miraculous event which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history."

Is this a sneer or satire? Of course it must be so regarded if the author of the "Decline and Fall" was a deist. Then there is nothing more atrocious and unpardonable in all literature. It falls little short of impiety and blasphemy to hold up to ridicule and contempt the narrative of the crucifixion of the world's Redeemer. And where does this vice of the historian begin, and where does it end, in a work which has so much to do with the history of the church, its ministers and doctrines? And of what avail, then, are the eulogiums passed upon his laborious research, his general accuracy, his unrivalled felicity of expression, and the wonderful combination of all the great qualifications of a writer of history found in him? They cannot and ought not to save him or his work from the contempt of his fellow-men; for the charge brought against him is established only by proving another; to wit, an unpardonable perversion and an utter disregard of the dignity of a noble species of literature to which he devoted his life, by devoting so many of his pages (his readers finding it difficult to decide when and where) to satire and irony on the most serious of all subjects.

Comparing the effect of what good Bishop Watson says of "the silence of profane historians concerning the preternatural darkness" with the impression the language of Gibbon is fitted to produce on an unsuspecting mind, it seems far less favorable to the wonder and devotion which such a miracle ought to awaken. He devotes himself to proving that the darkness may have been neither excessive nor extensive, and might have been occasioned by the darkening of the sun through the intervention of clouds, and that it extended only for a few miles about Jerusalem.

In like manner Milman explains away much of the supernatural which accompanied the crucifixion. "This super-

natural gloom," is his language, "appears to resemble that terrific darkness which precedes an earthquake.¹ The same convulsion [the earthquake] would displace the stones which covered the ancient tombs, and lay open many of the innumerable rock-hewn sepulchres which perforated the hills on every side of the city, and expose the dead to public view. To the awe-struck and depressed minds of the followers of Jesus, no doubt, were confined those visionary appearances of the spirits of their deceased brethren which are obscurely intimated in the rapid narratives of the evangelists." To which he adds, in a foot-note: "Those who assert a supernatural eclipse of the sun rest on the most dubious and suspicious tradition; while those who look with jealousy on natural causes, however so timed as in fact to be no less extraordinary than events altogether contrary to the course of nature, forget or despise the difficulty of accounting for the apparently slight sensation produced on the minds of the Jews, and the total silence of all other history."² All this in a work written, as it would seem, for the express purpose of answering or meeting "the radical defect in the Decline and Fall"!

Even Guizot seems to regard the darkness at the crucifixion as a phenomenon which did not extend beyond Jerusalem, and as no more than an obscurity of the atmosphere occasioned by clouds or some other natural cause; and refers for authority to the Notes of Michaelis and the Commentary of Paulus on the New Testament.³

Better let the Pagan world be represented, as it is in the pages of Gibbon, turning aside from the awful spectacle and busying itself in the ordinary occupations of life, unconscious of what is passing — another mournful proof of the blinding influence of the "ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. i. 18 sq.).

¹ History of Christianity from the Birth of Christ to the Abolition of Paganism, etc. (London, 1840), Vol. i. p. 363.

² Idem, p. 365.

³ See his note near the end of the Fifteenth Chapter of the Decline and Fall.

As illustrating the manner in which Gibbon regarded the supernatural, it would be apposite in this connection, were there space, to introduce his account of what he styles a "preternatural event, not disputed by the infidels," and supported by such "authority as should satisfy a believing, and must astonish an incredulous mind," namely, the earthquake and fiery eruption which defeated the apostate Julian's attempt to disprove the prophecies of Christ, by erecting a stately temple for the Jews on the commanding eminence of Moriah. "The imperial sophist," he says, "would have converted the success of his undertaking into a specious argument against the faith of prophecy and the truth of revelation." He speaks of the evidence supporting a divine interposition to defeat this impious undertaking in a way which implies that it could not be called in question by a fair and reasonable mind, and of course convinced his own.

11. *The Causes, the Extent, Duration, etc. of the Persecutions to which the first Christians were exposed.*

As the author commences his account of the persecutions with those under Nero, and omits all mention of those recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, it has been contended that this omission tends to throw discredit on the authenticity of that book of holy scripture; for, if authentic, it was necessary for him to consult and quote it. Two reasons may be given for his neglect to refer to the persecutions recorded in the Acts, without any intention on his part, to express doubt, or cast the least suspicion on its authenticity. 1. His subject confined him to the persecutions inflicted by the Pagans; those recorded in the Acts were Jewish persecutions; and it does not give an account even of the martyrdom of the apostle Paul. 2. He avowedly left the defence of Christianity, as a divine revelation, or where it rested on inspiration for its evidence, to the theologian.

Again: it has been objected to this chapter, that it is "a disgraceful extenuation of the cruelties perpetrated by the Roman magistrates against the Christians"; and that it

exhibits a "most contemptibly factious spirit of prejudice against the sufferers." For proof of these charges, the manner in which he relates the death of Cyprian is referred to; and he is said to dwell, "with visible art, on the small circumstances of decorum and politeness which attended his murder." Turning to that account (it is written in Gibbon's best style), nothing is found disparaging to Cyprian; but the Proconsul is represented as pronouncing with some reluctance the sentence of death; and his presbyters and deacons are described as permitted to accompany him to the place of execution, and to assist him in laying aside his upper garment; and the Christians are represented as permitted to transport his remains by night, in a triumphant funeral procession, with a splendid illumination, to their burial-place. His account of the martyrdom of Cyprian professes to be a mere abstract of the authentic history of that event contained in an original life of Cyprian by the deacon Pontius, the companion of his exile and the spectator of his death, whose candor and impartiality he praises. He presents this account as "conveying the clearest information of the spirit, and of the forms of the Roman persecutions." It appears, therefore, that if there is any appearance of extenuation of the Roman persecutions in this case, it is chargeable to the deacon Pontius, whose account he epitomized.

Again, it has been thought that Gibbon betrays his scepticism by his disposition to underrate the number of martyrs. On this point he agreed with the learned Dodwell, who expressed the opinion which has been confirmed by the latest investigations in ecclesiastical history. Dr. Philip Schaff, citing the high authority of the learned and impartial Niebuhr, says, "that the Dioclesian persecution was a mere shadow as compared with the persecution of the Protestants in the Netherlands, by the Duke of Alva, in the service of Spanish bigotry and despotism." And Dr. Arnold, in speaking of a visit to the church of St. Stephen at Rome remarks: "It is likely enough, too, that Gibbon has truly accused the general statements of exaggeration. But divide the sum

total of reported martyrs by twenty, by fifty if you please ; after all you have a number of persons of all ages and sexes, suffering cruel torments and death for conscience' sake and for Christ's sake, and by their sufferings, manifestly with God's blessing, ensuring the triumph of Christ's gospel." Mosheim says that no doubt many of the names of those found in the immense army of the martyrs might with great propriety be struck out of the list, and adds a remark in which he is almost literally followed by Gibbon, that the Roman magistrates did not direct their severity promiscuously against the great body of Christians at large, but selected as objects of capital punishment such of them as filled the office of bishop and presbyter. "Were Dodwell's position," he adds, "to be so far modified as to assert merely that the number of martyrs was considerably less than is commonly supposed, it must command the ready assent of every one whose judgment has not been mislead by popular traditions and idle stories."

If Gibbon "regretted the subversion of the old Pagan systems," which is one of the charges brought against him, we should naturally expect to discover the evidence of it in his account of the emperor Julian. On the contrary, he distinctly says that in the creed which Julian adopted "by a strange contradiction, he disdained the salutary yoke of the gospel, while he made a voluntary offering of his reason on the altars of Jupiter and Apollo. But as the faith which is not founded on revelation must remain destitute of any firm assurance, the disciple of Plato imprudently relapsed into the habits of vulgar superstition." He charges him with puerility and fanaticism, with duplicity, hypocrisy, and persecution.¹ Contrast with this account the sketch which

¹ "Even bigots," says Rev. Dr. Robertson, the historian, "I should think must allow that you have delineated his most singular character with a more masterly hand than ever touched it before." In the same letter (dated May 11, 1781), he expresses the hope that his new volumes will escape the illiberal abuse his first volume drew upon him ; and he pays him this high compliment : "It was always my idea that an historian should feel himself a witness giving evidence upon oath. I am glad to perceive by your minute scrupulosity that your notions are the same."

he draws of "the great Athanasius" as he styles him, on whose history and character he seems to dwell, as with a loving fondness for nearly one hundred pages of his work. "The immortal name of Athanasius will never be separated from the catholic doctrine of the Trinity to whose defence he consecrated every moment and every faculty of his being. Seated on the archiepiscopal throne of Egypt, he filled that eminent station above forty-six years, and his long administration was spent in a perpetual combat against the powers of Arianism." He "displayed a superiority of character and abilities which would have qualified him, far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine, for the government of a great monarchy." To no other character that comes into notice in his history does Mr. Gibbon pay a higher tribute than to the strict and rigid Athanasius.

PART II.

12. *Gibbon's Autobiography and Miscellaneous Writings.*

It remains to inquire whether from other writings or his opinions elsewhere put on record, there is any evidence that Mr. Gibbon rejected Christianity. His *Miscellaneous Works*, published after his death, by his friend Lord Sheffield, are contained in two large quarto volumes of more than fourteen hundred pages. In this large mass of writings, consisting of *Memoirs of his Life and Writings*, several entire works or fragments on a great variety of literary themes, copious notes on his life-long readings and studies, and a large number of letters to and from both friends and strangers — is there anything to convict him of hatred to Christianity?

His autobiography is one of the most remarkable records of a literary life ever penned. The late Rev. J. W. Alexander says, in his *Familiar Letters*: "Read Gibbon's autobiography again; it rouses me like a bugle." Scarcely with any other celebrated author of another generation and country, have we the means of becoming so well acquainted. "Few men I believe," says Lord Sheffield, in his *Preface*, "have so fully unveiled their own characters by a minute narrative of

their sentiments and pursuits, as Mr. Gibbon will be found to have done ; not with study and labor, not with an affected frankness, but with a genuine confession of his little foibles and peculiarities, and a good-humored and natural display of his own conduct and opinions."

13. *His Childhood; Mrs. Porten; Oxford; becomes a Roman Catholic.*

Of a feeble constitution, he was doated upon, and his childhood cared for, by an affectionate aunt (Mrs. Porten), who inspired him with an invincible love of reading; "at whose name (he says late in life) I feel a tear of gratitude trickle down my cheek." In his sixteenth year his health improved, and he was sent to the University of Oxford, where he seems to have been left very much to himself, to study or to neglect study, as best pleased him. He complains particularly that an ecclesiastical school should have failed to "inculcate the orthodox principles of religion," and that he "was left by the dim light of his (my) catechism to grope his (my) way to the chapel and the communion table, where he (I) was admitted without question, how far, or by what means he (I) might be qualified to receive the sacrament." Neglected by his instructors, he gave way to the taste which had been fostered in him, and read incessantly. His passion then was for Arabic learning, which never deserted him, and which he was able to turn to good account in his subsequent historical investigations.

His active mind also busied itself with religious questions. The controversy, occasioned by Dr. Middleton's Treatise on the Genuineness of Post-apostolic Miracles was then rife. He read what was written on both sides ; and, perhaps, naturally enough, considering the ground which the church of England then so strenuously held, in favor of the genuineness of these miracles, became a Roman Catholic. He read Bossuet's exposition of the doctrine of his church, and History of the Variations of Protestantism, and the writings of Parsons, a Jesuit of the time of queen Elizabeth, and was

strengthened in his conviction. He went to London, and, at the feet of a Romish priest, abjured the Protestant faith, and wrote a long letter to his father, announcing the change with all the ardor of a new convert.

14. *Is sent to Lusanne ; Mr. Pavilliard ; returns to Protestantism, and receives the Sacrament.*

His connection with Oxford was, of course, brought to an end, and, with his father's displeasure, he was sent to Lusanne, to make his home in the family of a minister of the school and church of Calvin, a Mr. Pavilliard. This clergyman's house was in a gloomy unfrequented street of this unhandsome Swiss town. In his native country the expatriated youth had been accustomed to all the elegances and luxuries of life. He was now without a servant, and could neither speak nor understand a word of French. He devoted himself earnestly to study. Mr. Pavilliard was an excellent scholar, and directed his studies with judgment and zeal. French at length became more familiar to him than his native English, and was used as the instrument in conducting his mental processes. He attacked Latin, and eventually Greek, with an ardor seldom equalled, and became an exact and critical scholar in these languages. From all that he read and studied he filled common-place books with a profusion of notes and references.

Under the instruction and guidance of his clerical tutor, he was soon led to renounce the Roman Catholic faith, and joined the communion of the Swiss church. Mr. Pavilliard wrote to his father and aunt, "God has at length blessed my cares, and heard our prayers. I have had the satisfaction of bringing back Mr. Gibbon to the bosom of our Reformed church. I have made use with him neither of rigor nor of artifice." On Christmas-day, 1754, he received the sacrament in the Protestant church of Lusanne. "It was here," says the historian, in his Memoirs of himself, "that I suspended religious inquiries ; acquiescing with implicit belief in the tenets and mysteries which are adopted by the general con-

sent of Catholics and Protestants.” These Memoirs profess to have been written, in the fifty-second year of his age, after the completion of his history. We have, therefore, a formal, distinct avowal of what his faith was, and had been from an early age up to the period named. He surely ought to have the benefit of his own statement, and solemn declaration on this subject, if we are to respect him at all, or believe him on any other. Or, is it necessary to regard him as here speaking in a double, ironical sense?

The following is from a letter which young Gibbon wrote to his father on the occasion of his return to the Protestant faith: It illustrates, at the same time that it shows what was the state of his religious opinions, to what an extent he had lost the correct use of his mother-tongue, and had adopted a foreign idiom. A comparison of it with the stately and magnificent sentences, which subsequently flowed from the same pen in the *Decline and Fall*, affords a signal proof of how little can be made out of the probabilities of internal evidence against clear external testimony: “I am now a good Protestant, and am extremely glad of it. I have in all my letters taken notice of the different movements of my mind, entirely Catholic when I came to Lusanne, wavering a long time between the two systems, and at last fixed for the Protestant. I had still another difficulty: brought up with all the ideas of the church of England, I could scarcely resolve to commune with Presbyterians, as all the people of this country are. I at last got over it, for considering that whatever difference there may be between their churches and ours in the government and discipline, they still regard us as brethren, and profess the same faith as us. Determined, then, in this design, I declared it to the ministers of the town, who, having examined me, permitted me to receive it with them, which I did Christmas-day,” etc.

15. *The Books he valued, and his Study of the Scriptures in Greek.*

He always speaks of Mr. Pavilliard in terms of the highest respect and gratitude. He names a book which next to his

tutor, contributed most effectually to his education, De Crou-saz's Logic; whose philosophy, he says, was formed in the school of Locke, and his divinity in that of Limborch and LeClerc, ministers of the church of Holland. He also gives the names of three books which he says contributed to form the historian of the Roman empire: the Provincial Letters of Paschal, Gianone's Civil History of Naples, and the Life of Julian by the Abbé de la Bleterie, the perusal of which seems to have led to his first essay on "the truth of the miracle which stopped the re-building of the temple of Jerusalem."

He appears to have been a regular attendant on public worship, both in Switzerland and England, and makes record in his journal of reading every Sunday the scripture lessons of the day in the Greek, a very remarkable practice in one who had no respect for revelation. He commenced it as early as 1759, and continued it even when marching about the country, as he did for more than two years, as a captain of the national militia in the Hampshire regiment, whenever he attended church. In his journal, under date of July 18, 1762, he records: "I did nothing but go to church. The lessons were the twelfth chapter of 2d Samuel and the fifth chapter of St. John's Gospel, both of which I read in Greek."

His regiment was then in camp at "the fashionable resort of Southampton." Again, under date of August 1st, same year: "I read the lessons at church in Greek, namely, the thirteenth chapter of the first book of Kings, and the twenty-first chapter of St. John's Gospel. How very free a version the Septuagint is; for I imagine ours is a very literal one." "October 31st, 1752: I went to church, heard a pretty good sermon from Mr. L., and read the second lesson, the fourth chapter of St. Luke, in Greek."

If it should be imagined that he adopted this practice solely for the purpose of perfecting or preserving his knowledge of Greek, it should not be overlooked that he continued it when he had become absorbed in the study of Homer and Longinus.

16. *His first published Essay and Devotion to Literature.*

In his nineteenth year he returned to his native land, and three years afterwards published his first work, an Essay on the Study of Literature, written in French, which gained him some reputation. "The design of this essay was to prove that all the faculties of the mind may be exercised and displayed by the study of ancient literature, in opposition to D'Alembert and others of the French Encyclopedists, who contended for that new philosophy that soon produced such miserable consequences";¹ from which it is evident that he could not at this period of his life have been a disciple of this "new philosophy." His next effort was an attack on Warburton's famous "Divine Legation of Moses." Warburton was then the dictator and tyrant of the world of letters; and although Gibbon exposed the weakness of the particular theory he assaulted, the critics scarcely deigned to notice his performance. He projected other works which were successively abandoned. He travelled in France and Italy, and while at Rome, October 15th, 1764, the subject of his great work was suggested to him. He was a long time engaged in preparation, and making tentative efforts. He made many experiments before he could satisfy himself with his style. "Three times did I compose the first chapter, and twice the second and third, before I was tolerably satisfied with their effect. In the remainder of the way, I advanced with a more equal and easy pace; but the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters have been reduced, by three successive revisals, from a large volume to their present size." These chapters formed the conclusion of the first volume. The subject of them evidently deeply interested his mind, and they were composed with the greatest study and care, so that when he says in them that to the inquiry by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory, the "obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned, that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the

¹ Chalmers's Biographical Dictionary, Article, Gibbon.

ruling providence of its great Author," we are bound to believe that it was no careless expression, and that throughout these chapters he weighed every word.

17. *Eminent Religious Contemporaries who do not appear to have detected Hostility to Christianity in Gibbon.*

The Rev. Dr. George Campbell, translator of the Gospels, author of the *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, who answered Hume so triumphantly on miracles, and the Rev. Dr. Robertson the historian, praised the work on its first appearance, as a masterly performance, both in respect to matter and manner. Dr. Campbell's letter to Mr. Strahan, on the appearance of the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, is too important to be omitted. It is dated Aberdeen, June 25th, 1776:

"My expectations," he says, "were indeed high when I began it; but I assure you the entertainment I received greatly exceeded them. What made me fall to it with greater avidity was, that it had in part a pretty close connection with a subject I had occasion to treat sometimes in my theological lectures; to wit, the Rise and Progress of the Hierarchy, and you will believe that I was not the less pleased to discover in an historian of so much learning and penetration, so great a coincidence with my own sentiments, in relation to some obscure points in the *Christian Antiquities*." This theological professor and astute defender of the Christian faith, in the foregoing expression of high satisfaction, obviously refers particularly to the fifteenth chapter. And can it be supposed that he would have volunteered such an expression had he detected anything in the tone and manner of Mr. Gibbon wearing the aspect of hostility to Christianity?

Dr. Robertson was a friend and frequent correspondent of Mr. Gibbon. After reading his "*Vindication*" he writes to him that he had not observed any expression in it which he should wish to be altered. He belonged, it is said, to the moderate party, so-called, in the church of Scotland; but as regards the doctrines of his church, expressed in its

“Standards,” was a man of unquestioned orthodoxy. He was Principal of the University of Edinburgh, and Minister of one of the parish churches. Robertson and Campbell are the greatest names the Scottish church numbers among its clergy, with the exception perhaps of Reid and Chalmers.

18. *Mr. Gibbon's Rejoinders to the Attacks on him in his Memoirs and “Vindication.”*

“I had flattered myself,” he says in his Memoirs, “that an age of light and liberty would receive, without scandal, an inquiry into the human causes of the progress and establishment of Christianity.” But there is one expression in his Memoirs, touching these suspected chapters, which, taken by itself, wears, it must be admitted, a somewhat suspicious aspect. It is found in the following: “Had I believed that the majority of English readers were so fondly attached even to the name and shadow of Christianity; had I foreseen that the pious, the timid, and the prudent would feel, or affect to feel, with such exquisite sensibility, I might perhaps have softened the two invidious chapters.” But what, clearly, must be his meaning in this? He must of course refer to their attachment to that which was no more than a “name and shadow,” and no real part of Christianity. He could not, with any sincerity, doubt that the majority of English readers were attached to the name itself of Christianity, however far many of them may have been from being real Christians. Nothing, he emphatically declares, was more remote from his intentions and expectations, than to disturb the feelings of the pious. He seems to have been wholly taken by surprise; he frankly owns that he “was startled.” Having, in these same Memoirs, declared his “implicit belief” in the doctrines of the Bible, as commonly received among Christians, we must understand him, where he speaks of “the name and shadow of Christianity” in such a manner that he shall not stultify and confound himself. He evidently means no more than that he was wholly taken by surprise, that his discussion of the human or secondary

causes of the progress of Christianity, his rejection of some things which the Christian world, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, had united in receiving, such as the post-apostolic miracles, and the immense number of the primitive martyrs, should have given such offence.

His fear, he says, was soon "converted into indignation," and he resolved to observe silence, trusting himself and his writings to the candor of the public, until Mr. Davis of Baliol College, Oxford, presumed to attack, "not the faith, but the fidelity of the historian." This led to the publication of his "Vindication," mainly confined to the charge of want of historical fidelity, brought by Davis and Chelsum and Travis. Dr. Johnson is reported to have said that if Davis had made the errors Gibbon charged back upon him, he must have been a blockhead. And an equally unsparing criticism was passed by the learned Porson on the attack of Archdeacon Travis. It may well be asked, If Gibbon was so formidable an antagonist to the Christian cause, why its defence was left to men so feeble that their connection with this controversy is all that preserves their names from utter oblivion? Why did not Hurd or Horne or Porteus or Horseley enter the lists against him? Gibbon speaks with great respect of Bishop Watson and of his mode of thinking as bearing a "liberal and philosophic cast." "He very justly," says Gibbon, "and politely declares that a considerable part, near seventy pages of his small volume, are not directed to me, but to a set of men whom he places in an odious and contemptible light." The part referred to is headed, "Appeal to Infidels." "He fairly owns," continues Gibbon, "that I have expressly allowed the full and irresistible weight of the first great cause of the success of Christianity; and he is too candid to deny that the five secondary causes which I had attempted to explain operated with some degree of active energy toward the accomplishment of that great event. The only question which remains between us relates to the degree of the weight and effect of those secondary causes; and as I am persuaded that our

philosophy is not of the dogmatic kind, we should soon acknowledge that this precise degree cannot be ascertained by reasoning, nor perhaps be expressed by words." Dr. Watson, in a letter to Gibbon, which from its date, January 14th, 1779, appears to have been called forth by the "Vindication," addresses him as "a man whom I wish no longer to look upon as an antagonist, but as a friend."

To Dr. Priestly, who charged him with attempting "to discredit Christianity in fact, while in words he represented himself as a friend to it," he writes: "as long as you attack opinions which I have never maintained, or maintain principles which I have never denied, you may safely exult in my silence, and your own victory." And then he retorts on him in these caustic words: "The public will decide to whom the invidious name of unbeliever justly belongs; to the historian, who, without interposing his own sentiments, has delivered a simple narrative of authentic facts, or to the disputant, who proudly rejects all natural proofs of the immortality of the soul, overthrows (by circumscribing) the inspiration of the evangelists and apostles, and condemns the religion of every Christian nation, as a fable less innocent, but not less absurd than Mahomet's journey to the third heaven."

19. *Gibbon's Opinions of Bayle, Voltaire, and the French Revolution.*

He evidently held Bayle in high esteem as a philosopher, but seems to have regarded Voltaire as no more than a fine and superficial writer; and of his *Treatise on Toleration* had no higher opinion than Bishop Watson himself. In his journal, under date of March 14th, 1764, he speaks of having read this treatise, and pronounces it a trifling collection of common-place remarks, and represents himself as "diverted with his false and contradictory conclusions concerning ancient history. This history he (Voltaire) says is filled with prodigies. They cannot be true; therefore ancient history consists merely of fable and conjecture" etc. Voltaire meant to include the Bible, on account of its miracles or prodigies, with other ancient history.

Mr. Gibbon seems to have had no sympathy whatever with the infidels of the French Revolution. The execution of the monarch filled him with grief and indignation. The prevalence of revolutionary doctrines on the Continent at length led him to desert his beloved Lusanne. "I beg leave," he said, "to subscribe to Mr. Burke's creed on the Revolution of France." In reference to his decided opinions on this subject and his strong feelings, Lord Sheffield says: "So strongly was his opinion fixed as to the danger of hasty innovations, that he became a warm and zealous advocate for every sort of old establishment, which he marked in various ways, sometimes rather ludicrously; and I recollect, in a circle where French affairs were the topic, and some Portuguese present, he, seemingly with seriousness, argued in favor of the inquisition at Lisbon; and said he would not at the present moment give up even that old establishment." This, doubtless, serves to explain the sense of a sentence in one of his letters to Lord Sheffield, in which he descants with great warmth on what he styles the "French-disease"; a sentence which taken by itself, certainly wears a suspicious aspect. After speaking in terms of high admiration of Burke's book, he says: "The primitive church, which I have treated with some freedom, was itself at that time an innovation, and I was attached to the old Pagan establishment." The mode of expression is certainly not to be approved; but if he could mark his dislike of the new doctrines, which were threatening society with disaster, by arguing with seeming seriousness in favor of the inquisition, it is easy to see how, in the warmth of his zeal, he was led into like exaggeration in reference to the old Paganism. His meaning was that he would resist any change in established institutions, rather than accept the doctrines and innovations of these French reformers.

20. *Result of this Inquiry.*

The result then of this inquiry, respecting the unbelief which has been charged upon Mr. Gibbon, is, that we no-

where find, in his voluminous writings, any instance of clear, outspoken unbelief, or rejection of the Christian religion. It appears that he had difficulties on the subject of the authenticity of the Book of Daniel, which he laid in a letter, which has never been published, before Dr. Richard Hurd, who had just then published a work on prophecy. But the fact that these difficulties were confined to a single book of the Old Testament, and that he submitted them to so able a scholar and defender of the faith as Dr. Hurd, is surely no evidence that he rejected divine revelation. On the contrary, we find him expressing implicit belief in the doctrines commonly received among Christians. It further appears that the charge of infidelity on the part of some of his contemporaries, arose from what they were pleased to regard as innuendo; in other words, they charged that he said one thing while he meant another. If they were right then he prostituted history; he set at naught the dignity of a science to which he devoted years of studious investigation, and his conduct richly deserves the severe language of Priestley: "A conduct which I scruple not to call highly unworthy and mean; an insult to the common sense of the Christian world"; and justified him in calling upon Gibbon to "defend not his (your) principles only, but his (your) honor. For what can reflect greater dishonor on a man than to say one thing and mean another?" It greatly lessens, if it does not destroy, the value of his work as one of history, and ought to consign it to no higher place than that of a splendid specimen in the cabinet of literary curiosities.

21. *Can the Opinion concerning Gibbon's Unbelief be accounted for?*

If he was not an infidel it seems indeed truly marvellous that the opposite opinion has been so generally adopted in the religious world. Many writers of the highest repute seem to have regarded it as beyond all question. Were it not for the danger of extending these pages beyond their prescribed limits, it would be instructive to notice the manner

in which they state and attempt to refute the alleged position of the historian, as it could hardly fail to lead to the conviction that they would have been wiser to imitate those eminent defenders of Christian truth, Campbell, Horseley, and Horne, who sounded no note of alarm.

But may not this unfavorable opinion be accounted for in good measure at least from the following considerations?

1. He was led to advance views on several religious questions of great interest at the time he wrote, which had led to heated controversy, contrary to those which had been long and almost universally received; which the Reformed churches had adopted from Romish historians. His vast learning placed him far in advance of the generality of scholars of the Protestant world. Ecclesiastical history had not been studied and explored as it has since been.

One of these subjects was the genuineness of the miracles subsequent to the apostolic age. The general opinion of the religious world may be learned from the *odium theologicum* which was visited upon Dr. Conyers Middleton, on the publication of his work, "A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers," etc. Dr. Middleton was a man of extensive learning. The doctrine of his book was, that miraculous powers ceased with the apostles, and that following their age we can find an interval of about fifty years where there is no mention made of the existence of, or claims to, any such powers, during which some of the purest and best Fathers wrote. Dr. Middleton's book, the doctrine of which is now received with general approbation throughout the Protestant world, threw the whole English church into a ferment, as it seemed to involve such men as Chrysostom, Augustine, and other venerated writers of the church, previous to the Reformation in delusion. It was charged against him that his object was to impeach the credit of the miracles of our Lord and his apostles. His work was condemned by the authorities of his church, and the University of Oxford conferred degrees on his opponents. Gibbon, an under-graduate of the University, read Middleton's book, and the numerous answers it called

forth ; and was led by the controversy and the Roman Catholic authors he consulted, to renounce the Protestant faith. From the severe manner in which Mosheim, who defended the genuineness of the miracles of the second and third centuries, condemned Middleton, we learn that the opinions of the continental divines corresponded to those of the English.

Gibbon, upon his return to Protestantism, became a disciple of Middleton on this question, and in his history advanced the same views. "The church of England, which had prided herself on her liberality and learning, found that she was ranked in point of credulity with Papists and Pagans themselves. It was very exasperating. She rose against it and attacked the historian ; and hence Gibbon has received a character for misrepresentation which he does not deserve."¹ His rejection of the miracles subsequent to the times of the apostles was interpreted as a virtual rejection of all miracles, and of course caused him to be regarded as an infidel ; and all that he might say touching Christianity to be looked upon with doubt and suspicion. Consistently with this, what Gibbon says of the miracles and doctrine of the gospel, and the ruling providence, in the affairs of men, of its Author, is understood in an ironical sense, or as a compliment couched in latent sarcasm.

Another of the subjects on which the opinions of Gibbon awakened prejudice and suspicion against him, was the number of martyrs, and what he says respecting the intemperate zeal with which many sought the crown of martyrdom. In this he followed the learned Dodwell. Gibbon and Dodwell may have underrated their number, but not more, according to Mosheim, than they were overrated by their opponents. Ecclesiastical writers on this subject too, have now come very generally to agree with them. It would not be surprising, when we take into account the peculiar facts of his early personal history, if Gibbon took some pleasure in penning such sentences as the following :

¹ Dr. L. Withington, *Theol. Rev.* (1835), Vol. ii. p. 45.

“The church of Rome defended by violence the empire which she had acquired by fraud ; a system of peace and benevolence [meaning the true Christian system, or the gospel] was soon disgraced by proscriptions, war, massacres, and the institution of the holy office [the inquisition]. And as the Reformers were animated by the love of civil as well as of religious freedom, the Catholic princes connected their own interest with that of the clergy, and enforced by fire and sword the terrors of spiritual censures. If we are obliged to submit our belief to the authority of Grotius, it must be allowed that the number of Protestants who were executed in a single province and a single reign far exceeded that of the primitive martyrs, and in the space of three centuries and of the Roman empire.”

2. The bitter spirit of animosity against Christianity, which prevailed in Europe at the time Gibbon wrote, which found expression in the French Encyclopedists, and the writings of such men as Bolingbroke and Hume, made it easy to arouse suspicion, and prepared the Christian world to believe that there were no arts, however mean and dishonorable, to which the enemies of the gospel would scruple to resort. It is more easy to arouse than to allay suspicion. And in a controversy in which the accusation of infidelity lies against one side, there can be no doubt on which side Christians will readily arrange themselves. It is evident that the majority have never examined the question in regard to Gibbon for themselves, but have been content to take their opinion at second-hand. Something very different from what appears even to have been good Bishop Watson's final judgment in the case has been propagated as an opinion no longer to be questioned ; so much so, that no more is necessary than to ask : Was Gibbon an infidel ? to awaken surprise equal, perhaps, to that which would be occasioned were it seriously asked : Was Baxter a Christian ?

Taking up one of the latest publications in which Gibbon is noticed, we find almost as many errors or misstatements concerning him, as there are sentences. (1) “Gibbon was even

more of a Frenchman than Hume." The meaning must be that he was more infected with French philosophy, and pleased with French manners and society. Gibbon appears to have visited Paris only twice; and, on both occasions, tarried but a short time. M. Necker and his excellent lady, the daughter of a Protestant clergymen, were his chief friends. (2) "Sundering his relation to Oxford in his seventeenth year, he embarked upon a course of living and thinking which, whatever advantage it might afford to his purse, was not likely to aid his faith." His connection with Oxford was dissolved on account of his renunciation of the Protestant faith; and he was sent to Switzerland, under the displeasure of his father, on the most stinted pecuniary allowance. (3) "By a sudden caprice he became a Roman Catholic, and afterwards as unceremoniously denied his adopted creed." The good Mr. Pavilliard, on the contrary, relates with what patience and pains he gradually led him back to the truth. (4) "In due time he found himself in Paris publishing a book in the French language." This book, the *Essay on the Study of Literature*, written in French, was published in London, when he was yet an entire stranger in the French capital. (5) "He there fell in with the fashionable infidelity, and so far yielded to the flattery of Helvetius, and all the frequenters of Holbach's house, that he jested at Christianity and assailed its divine character." When Mr. Gibbon was on his first visit at Paris, he was a visitor at the house of the Baron d'Olbach, and received polite attention from Helvetius; but there is not the least evidence, in his *Memoirs*, or letters, that Christianity was jested at, or even made the subject of discussion. (6) "While residing at Lusanne, Switzerland, he cultivated the florid French style of composition, and applied it in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*." He so far lost the correct use of his native tongue during his early residence at Lusanne, that it was only by a long and difficult process he was able to form the style adopted in his history after his return to England. (7) "That work has been severely censured; but,

despite its defects, it is one of the permanent masterpieces of English literature." The first true sentence. (8) "In the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters the author gives his opinion of Christianity." These chapters contain the history of the progress and early persecutions of Christianity, and it is not their object to express the author's opinion of Christianity, excepting as it appears in the statement of the causes of its wonderful victory. (9) "He attributes the progress of the Christian religion to the zeal of the Jews, to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul as stated by philosophers, to the miraculous powers claimed by the primitive church, to the virtues of the first Christians, and to the activity of the Christians in the government of the church." It will be observed by comparison with Mr. Gibbon's language on a previous page, that the writer states but two of these causes, with any degree of correctness. In reference to the second, for example, the doctrine of immortality, Mr. Gibbon argues as philosophy could only feebly point out the desire, the hope, or at the most the probability, of a future state, that "a divine revelation" was necessary.

The volume from which the above citations are made was published in New York in 1865, has passed through several editions, and been re-published in London. If its statements of the history of opinion in other cases is no more accurate, of what value can it be?

Take another example of like kind. Thomas B. Shaw, B.A., Professor of English Literature in the Imperial Alexander Lyceum of St. Petersburg, in his excellent work, "Outlines of English Literature," proves, in his notice of Gibbon, in more than one instance, that he had formed his judgment, rather from the opinions of others, than from an original examination of his writings. Thus he represents Gibbon as returning to England, shortly before the close of his life, induced by the death of Lord Sheffield, to console and counsel the widow. Of course he could never have read Gibbon's *Memoirs of himself*, nor his posthumous *Miscellaneous Writings*, published under the editorial supervision

of this same Lord Sheffield. In the several American editions of Professor Shaw's work, which have been examined, this error is repeated. And it will probably be found that in the majority of cases, the unfavorable judgment respecting Gibbon has been taken at second hand, or even at third and fourth; and in this manner has been perpetuated, in literary history.

It may be asked, If Gibbon was not an infidel, why he did not, in so many words, deny the charge, and in full vindication of himself, employ his fine powers in defence of Christianity? So far as denying the charge is concerned, it might be said that he did this in his letters to Dr. Watson, the only one of his assailants for whom he seems to have had any respect; but especially in the notice he took of the bishop's Apology in his Vindication, where he distinctly says that the only question between them related, not to the first cause, nor to the existence of secondary causes, but merely to the degree of influence to be attributed to those secondary causes in the propagation of Christianity.

After he had recovered from the first startling effect of the objections made to his history, he confesses to a feeling of "indignation"; but he resolved, as he informs us, where his principles were concerned, to leave them to speak for themselves. To defend himself against the charge of infidelity, in the form made, would have been to acknowledge himself guilty of a most disreputable literary blunder, in having composed a work which required to be vindicated against such a charge. We have had an example, recently, of the indignant scorn with which a distinguished American writer of history repelled the charge, that he "despised American democracy," as "so pitiful a fabrication, that he blushed (I blush) while he denounced (I denounce) it." He refers to his writings for proof of his being a "fervent believer in American democracy," and says, "I scorn to dwell longer on the contemptible charge."¹ So Mr. Gibbon appears to have preferred that his contemporaries and posterity should

¹ The Motley-Seward Correspondence, Nov. 21, 1866 and Dec. 11, 1867.

judge him in respect to the matter whereof he was called in question by what he had put on record, rather than by any reply he could make to the false accusations or misinterpretations, and special pleadings of his antagonists.

22. *Conclusion — Morals of Gibbon.*

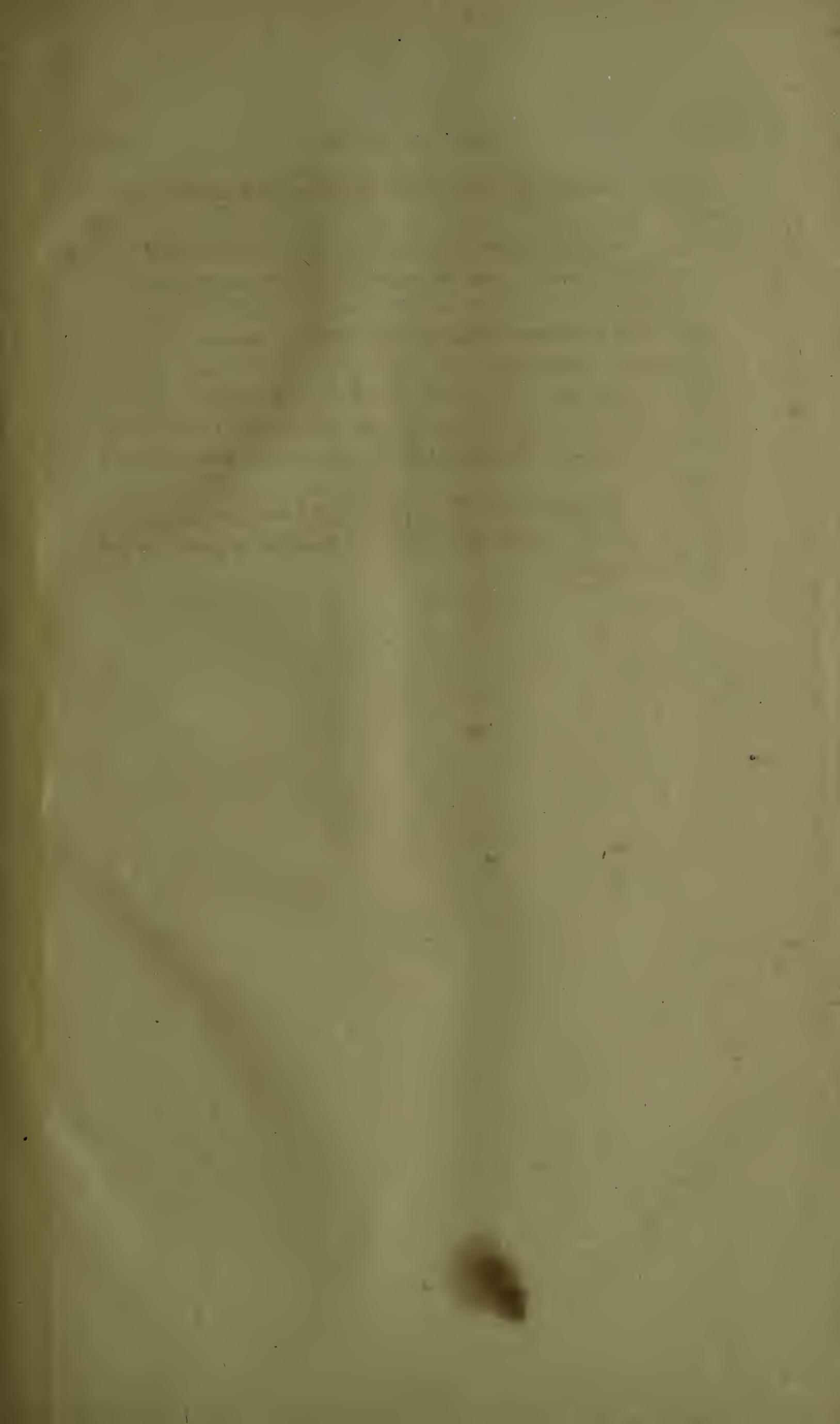
The severest critics and reviewers of Mr. Gibbon have never attempted to cast any reproach on his character as an amiable and upright man, nor to question the stainless purity of his morals. They admit that he was "affectionate and even piously attentive to relatives who could contribute little to his entertainment, and nothing to his emolument; that he was constant in unequal friendship, and grateful to fallen greatness; that he delighted in the conversation of chaste and accomplished women, and his correspondence with friends of his own sex was never tinged with pruriency of imagination."¹ It is not contended that he was a devout Christian; he may have been what some would denominate "a man of the world." He was devoted to literature and philosophy, and was ambitious of fame. But that he rejected Christianity remains to be proved. He sometimes gave utterance to expressions, which, taken by themselves or viewed apart from other expressions, might be interpreted to wear a hostile aspect towards revealed religion. For example, when he speaks of Mr. Joseph Milner, one of his critics, as pronouncing "an anathema against all rational religion," and denouncing "natural Christians," we might be ready to say Mr. Gibbon was a rationalist, which is but another name for infidel. But as we read on we discover his meaning: "The natural Christians, such as Mr. Locke, who believe and interpret the scriptures, are, in his [Mr. Milner's] judgment, no better than profane infidels." The writings of Mr. Locke had had great influence in his education, and he seems here clearly to wish to be classed with those Christians who according to the religious and philo-

¹ See Quarterly Review, Vol. xii. p. 387.

sophical writings of Mr. Locke, "believe and interpret the scriptures."

Can a man who after fifty years of age writes memoirs of himself, in which he puts on record that from an early period of his life, he had acquiesced in the tenets of the Christian faith, and in whose voluminous writings cannot be found any counter-statement, nor anything clearly irreconcilable with this avowed belief, be regarded as an infidel, on the ground merely of an interpretation, which involves the supposition of an utter disregard by him of the laws of good writing?

Shall we needlessly, or by a process of laborious argument, find an enemy in one who holds so eminent a place in the world of letters?



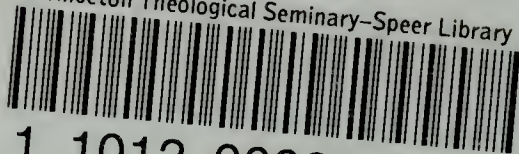
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